

*Dear Fire Service Professional,*

*We published Chief Dan Jones' editorial in our March/April issue and have received numerous letters and e-mails in response to his opinions. To make sure we're reaching all of our audience with this information, we'd like to share it with you here.*

*Sincerely,  
The Editors of National Fire & Rescue*

## **WHEN EMOTIONS TAKE OVER: PLANNING AN FD FUNERAL**

This is an uncomfortable subject to write about, and it will be uncomfortable for you to read. I have thought about this for a long time, and it is a subject that doesn't get discussed but should be. It should be thought out and talked about, especially before you find yourself—or your department—in the awful position of planning a fire department funeral. I am not talking about a funeral for a line-of-duty death. I am talking about the terrible situation where a member of your department dies or is killed off duty, and there is a push to provide for a traditional fire department funeral.

I have faced that situation more than once, not only within my own department, but also in departments of colleagues, when an active firefighter or fire officer passes away after a brief illness or an accident. Everyone in the department is totally shocked and caught off guard. We respond to situations all the time that involve tragic or untimely deaths and think we are steeled against it, but when it is one of our own, we react with shock and grief like any normal human being. It is especially hard if the death was totally unexpected or happened to a person of youth or someone in his prime. The natural reaction is to want to do all you can to show your respect for that colleague and to honor his family. We have many traditions in the fire service, and funerals rich with ceremony, honor and memorable symbolism are one of the strongest.

The traditions of fire department funerals have many elements and individual acts of honor. The more recognizable traditions include uniformed pallbearers and honor guards; Maltese cross floral arrangements; ringing or sounding of final alarms; presentation of badges, helmets or flags to family members; fire trucks in the funeral procession; rows of uniformed firefighters lining the walk for the family at the funeral; a black-draped fire truck to bear the casket in the procession; bagpipes; crossed aerials over the funeral procession route; and several others. All of these elements are intended to show honor and respect to a fallen colleague. Fire department funerals, whether line-of-duty or not, are always emotional and leave lasting impressions on everyone who attends and even those who see it passing by.

Thank God most fire departments will never have to contend with a line-of-duty death and the subsequent funeral ceremony. This is absolutely the most horrible event for any department and has ramifications, both short- and long-term, that only those who have experienced it can fully understand. However, the Fire Service has a strange fascination with the traditions of funerals, and the emotional pressure to provide such a funeral for a lost member—even when it doesn't come in the line of duty—can be great both within the department and from the family. This situation can create a very uncomfortable dilemma for a department and its leaders.

The question I pose is this: If you provide a full-honors fire department funeral for a member who is lost off duty, and you use all of the traditions that you know of and can provide, what will you do should a member of the department be lost in the line of duty at a later time? You have inadvertently created a situation whereby you have nothing extra to provide. I have seen this occur, and it is a very difficult situation that would have been avoided if some restraint had been exercised during a difficult and emotional time. I think there is a greater potential for this problem in smaller departments that have never, or only very rarely, experienced the loss of a member. When it does happen, emotions take over and everyone wants to do all they can, and before anyone thinks about it, a full-honors fire department funeral is provided in a situation that didn't really warrant it, which in turn may take away from a future loss.

Don't get me wrong. The loss of any member of a department is tough, and anyone who serves in this noble service should be honored for that service. I lost a member of my department several years ago in an off-duty accident. It was very emotional and we wanted to honor his service. But, with the full understanding of his family, we did not provide a full-honors type of service. I believe that several traditions should always be reserved for a line-of-duty death service. By holding some traditions back only for this purpose, the recognition of line-of-duty sacrifice is preserved. For example, I believe the tradition of bearing the casket on the hose bed of a fire engine and sounding the last alarm should be used only in a line-of-duty service. That is only my belief and yours may differ, but my point is that we need to keep some of the traditions more sacred.

It is both OK and advisable to include some fire department traditions and ceremonies of honor in the funeral of a lost colleague, even if the nature of loss was unrelated to the fire service. Just don't use all the traditions. Save some of the ceremonies and symbols. The greatest of your traditions, whatever you decide those are, should be reserved for a line-of-duty-death funeral. The other part to consider is the wishes of the family, along with their religious beliefs and stipulations. These are two important parts of the process that must be considered before suggesting the use of elements from fire service traditions.

The point of this editorial is that you should think about this before you find yourself in an arduous and emotional situation that makes decisions very difficult. There is also a strong argument within this discussion for having prepared standard operating procedures ahead of time for such events. Most departments resist having such procedures in place because there is the underlying fear that by preparing for such an event we might be inviting one. If you have such procedures in place ahead of time, you will save your department and your officers a great deal of difficulty in a situation that is already as difficult as it can get. And look at it this way: If your department is prepared with such procedures, your neighboring and mutual-aid departments can borrow them if they face a tragedy, and then you have provided a great service to your colleagues. There are several good resources for developing fire department funeral plans. There are also a number of well-prepared fire departments around the country that have developed funeral plans and procedures for different types of funerals, and therefore it is not necessary for you to develop such plans from scratch. Look to others who have already done the work and use those resources. A good place to start in developing your plan is the National Fallen Firefighter Foundation (NFFF). They have several resource materials for planning fire department funerals and can assist you in locating such procedures. To start, look at their Web site [www.firehero.org](http://www.firehero.org) and you will find the assistance you need. Several other fire service organizations, such as the Federation of Fire Chaplains, the National Volunteer Fire Council, the International Association of Fire Fighters and the International Association of Fire Chiefs, are all sources of assistance with such matters.

Helping to plan the funeral of a fire colleague is very difficult no matter what the circumstances are. Think about how you should differ the traditions you use in the case of an off-duty death versus a line-of-duty death. Honor both colleagues, but save the greatest traditions for those who make the ultimate sacrifice. And after you get a policy established, focus on your procedures and training, which help to ensure that a line-of-duty death never occurs in your department, and make sure everyone goes home.

—Dan Jones  
Editor-in-Chief  
Chief Dan Jones  
Chapel Hill (N.C.) FD